Chapter 68: The Rumored Eunuchs and Ice Cream

ARE YOU LOOKING INTO ANESTHETICS AGAIN, YOUNG LADY?
THEY WON'T BE MAKING ANY MORE EUNUCHS, SO...
...THERE'S NO NEED TO INVESTIGATE THAT.
THERE'S THAT FARAWAY GAZE AGAIN.
I ASKED THE QUACK HOW EUNUCHS ARE MADE EXACTLY, BEFORE.
THE PROCEDURE SOUNDS QUITE PAINFUL.
TOO PAINFUL TO REMEMBER, APPARENTLY. HE COULDN'T GIVE ME EXACT DETAILS.

HMM, I WONDER, HOW DO YOU TELL A EUNUCH IS A EUNUCH WHEN HE ENTERS INTO THE INNER COURT?
IN THE PAST, EACH EUNUCH BORE A CERTIFICATE.
BUT THAT GAVE WAY TO THE POTENTIAL FOR FAKING CREDENTIALS AND THE LIKE.
MEANING, GIVING IT A SQUEEZE?
NOTHING SO BOLD!
JUST A SIMPLE TOUCH TO CHECK IF THE EUNUCH REALLY IS ONE...
...WITH THREE OFFICERS TO WITNESS IT.
DAZE
NOW THEY OPT FOR... PALPATION.
SO THAT'S ONLY FOR THE EUNUCH'S FIRST ENTRY INTO THE INNER COURT?
HM?
IT'S ESSENTIALLY DONE ON EVERY ENTRY AND EXIT.
BUT FAMILIAR FACES ARE GIVEN FREE ACCESS.

THEN MAYBE... THE EMPEROR...?
NO, NO, SURELY NOT.
SPEAKING OF EUNUCHS...
XIAOLAN WAS TALKING ABOUT THAT.
OH, YEAH.
...A LOT OF THOSE NEW ONES ARE QUITE GORGEOUS.
I'M SURE YOU AND YOURS MUST BE VERY PLEASED, HM?
EUNUCHS ARE VERY MUCH THE OPPOSITE, AND MORE TO THEIR TASTES.
...FIND THEMSELVES PUT OFF BY THE TYPICAL ROUGH, OVERPOWERING MAN AND HIS COPIOUS BODY HAIR.
YOUNG GIRLS, ESPECIALLY VIRGINS CONCERNED WITH REMAINING CLEAN...

THE OTHER DAY, I CAUGHT SIGHT OF SOME LOWER-RANK CONSORTS...
...GETTING THEIR FILL OF ONE OF THE NEW ARRIVALS AS HE WAS HEATING THE BATHS.
YES, AND I'M SURE YOU WERE THERE BY HAPPEN-STANCE.
THE CONSORTS IN THE INNER PALACE ARE FOR THE EMPEROR ALONE, BUT MANY SELDOM SEE HIM.
SOME OF THEM MAY CAVORT WITH LADIES-IN-WAITING OR EUNUCHS ON THE SIDE.
WELL...
I SUPPOSE THAT CAN'T SIMPLY BE IGNORED.

SOON ENOUGH.
WHEN WILL YOU TAKE THE TIME FOR A SERIOUS TALK?
OH?
HMPH
PAP
HOW SOON IS SOON ENOUGH?
XIAOMAO WAS LOOKING AT YOU AS ONE WOULD A SLUG.
...BUT YOUR CONDUCT IS FAR TOO UNRESERVED. IT'S BECOME TOO MUCH TO IGNORE.
I UNDERSTAND IT'S WEIGHING ON YOU...

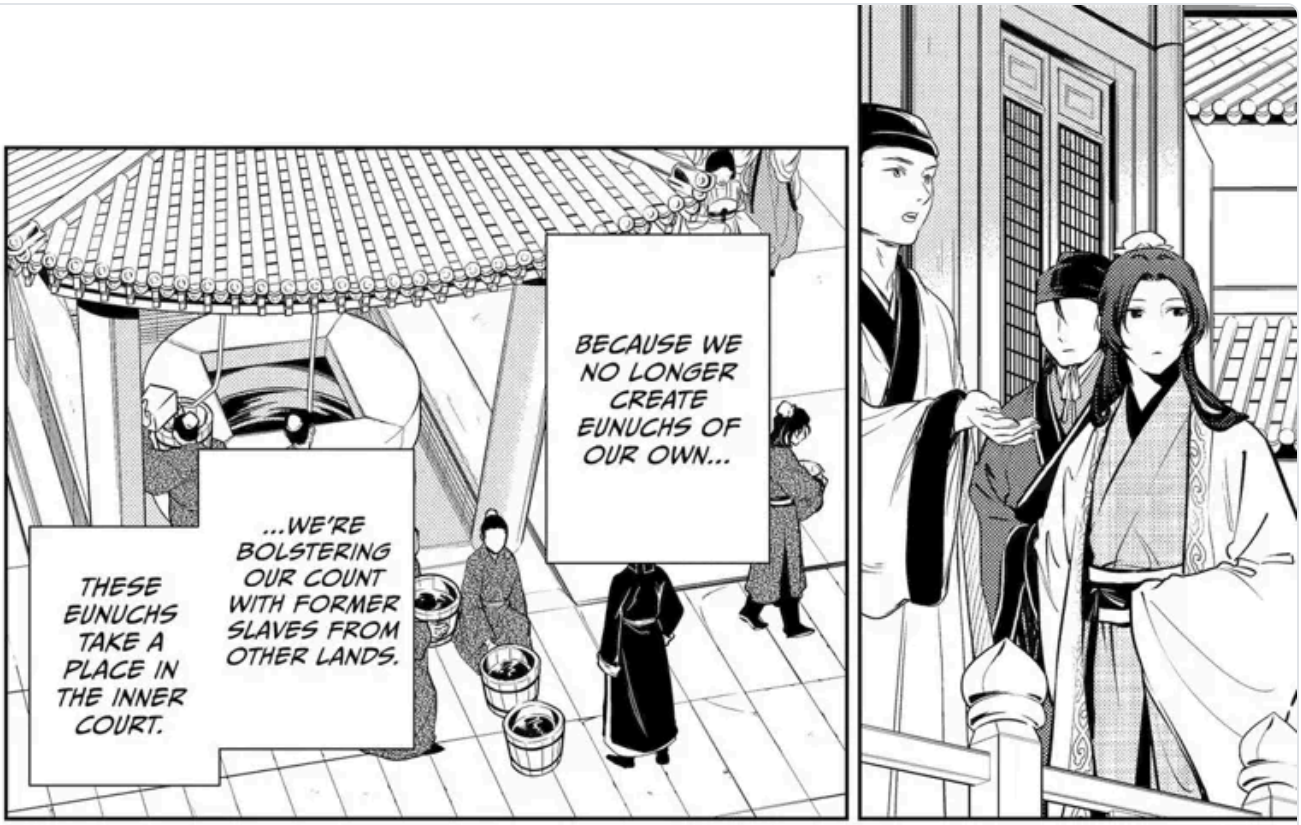
ENOUGH.
THE FACT THAT IT'S STILL LOST ON HER IS BIZARRE.
THAT SAID...
...IT'S NOT LIKE THAT WAS HOW I WANTED TO GET IT ACROSS IN THE FIRST PLACE.
I JUST WANT HER TO KNOW.
KNOW WHY IT IS I NEED TO CONCEAL WHO I AM.
BUT I'M NOT SURE HOW SHE MAY TAKE THE NEWS.

...YOU'LL COME TO REGRET HESITATING LATER ON.
IF YOU AREN'T DECISIVE NOW...
THE THOUGHT SCARES ME.
ISN'T SHE MORE TROUBLE THAN SHE'D BE WORTH?
THE STRATEGIST WOULDN'T BE FAR BEHIND HER.
HE REALLY WANTS ME TO REIN HER IN, AND QUICKLY.
YOU MUST FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE. OR POISON WITH POISON.

THE MAN IN THE MONOCLE...
...MANEUVERED PAST HIS FATHER AND HALF BROTHER SOME TEN YEARS AGO, STEALING THE RIGHT OF SUCCESSION...
...AND BECOMING HEAD OF THE LA CLAN.
EVEN THE EMPEROR ACKNOWL-EDGES HIS TALENT.
YET DESPITE HIS ESTEEMED MILITARY RANK, HE HASN'T THROWN HIS LOT IN WITH ANY OF THE JOCKEYING FACTIONS.
OBVIOUSLY, SOMEONE CLIMBING THE RANKS TWO AT A TIME ATTRACTS MANY WHO WOULD HINDER HIM...
...BUT ALL WHO TRIED ONLY CAME AWAY BURNED.
THE MAN HAS A GIFT FOR SEEING THINGS UNSEEN TO EVERYONE ELSE...
...AND CRAFTING SCRIPTS GUARANTEED TO BRING OTHERS LOW.
THIS IS WHY, EVEN THOUGH LAKAN IS TECHNICALLY OUR ALLY...
...THE IMPERIAL COURT KNOWS TO TREAD CAREFULLY.

HIS LARD-LADEN SNACKS ARE SURE TO GET GREASE ALL OVER MY DOCUMENTS.
PLEASE BEAR WITH IT.
SO MANY REQUESTS FROM THE CONSORTS TODAY.
YES.
WRITTEN REQUESTS FOR MORE EUNUCHS.
SOME LADIES-IN-WAITING HAVE BEGUN MAKING EYES AT THE NEW ONES ALREADY.
NOT ENTIRELY UNEXPECTED.
TRUE ENOUGH.

YES, SIR.
THOUGH WE SHOULD KEEP AN EYE ON THEM, JUST IN CASE.
THEIR FERVOR WILL COOL DOWN IN TIME.
SO IT GOES, SIR.
HASSLE AFTER HASSLE!
HAAAH
THE NEXT DAY


BECAUSE WE NO LONGER CREATE EUNUCHS OF OUR OWN...
...WE'RE BOLSTERING OUR COUNT WITH FORMER SLAVES FROM OTHER LANDS.
THESE EUNUCHS TAKE A PLACE IN THE INNER COURT.

THEIR EXPERIENCES AS SLAVES MAKE THEM VERY SKITTISH AROUND PEOPLE.
EVEN WITH THEIR NEWFOUND FREEDOM, THEY CAN'T ADJUST RIGHT AWAY.
REALLY, WORKING IN THE INNER COURT MAY BE THE BEST THING FOR THEM.

RIGHT NOW THEY'RE ALL WORKING BEHIND-THE-SCENES...
...BUT SOME MAY HAVE THE APTITUDE FOR MORE PROMINENT POSITIONS.

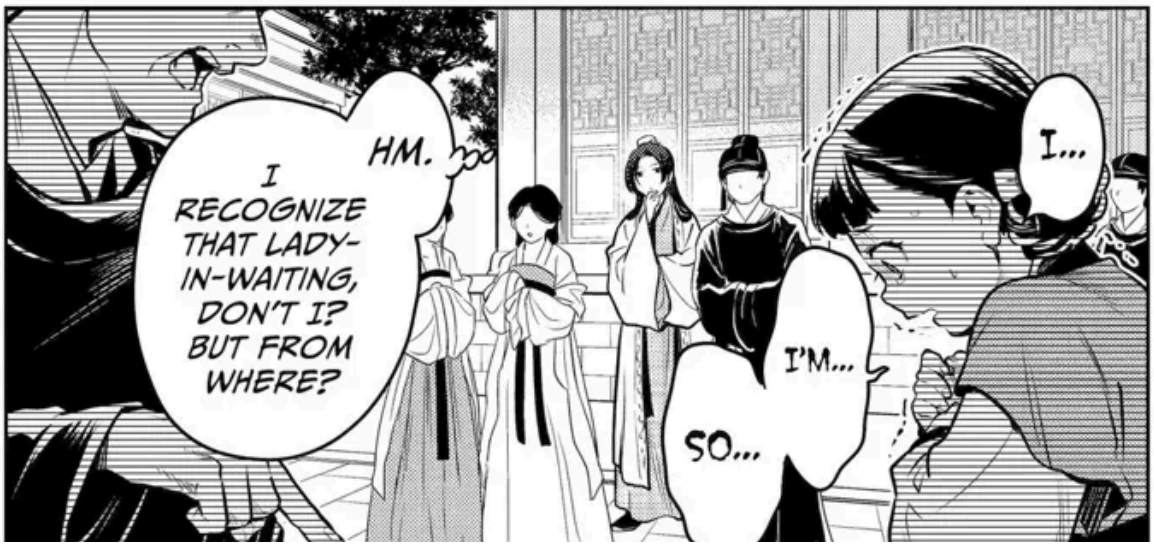
A NASTY BEATING LEFT HIM NUMB ON HIS LEFT SIDE.
BETWEEN THAT, AND HIS COPIOUS SCARS...
...HE ISN'T FOND OF REVEALING HIS SKIN.
...I SEE.
THEN HE REALLY SHOULDN'T BE DRAWING WATER, SHOULD HE?
WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT MAN'S LEFT ARM?
HE SHOULDN'T BE WORKING IN THE SOUTH END, CROWDED AS IT IS.
NOT TO MENTION HIS ATTRACTIVE, ATTENTION-DRAWING FEATURES.

STILL. POPULAR, ISN'T HE?
HE IS.
KEEN, AND VERY ATTENTIVE TO THE LADIES-IN-WAITING AT THAT.
STARE...
WHAT?
ARE YOU REALLY ONE TO TALK?
HM
WAAAH!
EEEEK!

WHAT WAS THAT?
CRASH
LOOK WHAT YOU'VE DONE!
THIS ICE IS FOR A CON-SORT!

A SINGLE CHIP OFF OF THIS ICE...
...IS WORTH MORE THAN YOUR LIFE!
HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO REPLACE THIS?!

IT'S STILL PRETTY WARM OUT.
A CONSORT MUST'VE REQUESTED THAT DIRECTLY.
ICE IS TAKEN FROM THE MOUNTAINS AND STORED DURING WINTER...
...SO IT'S QUITE PRECIOUS AND VALUABLE THIS TIME OF YEAR.


I...
I'M...
SO...
HM.
I RECOGNIZE THAT LADY-IN-WAITING, DON'T I? BUT FROM WHERE?

TMP
TMP
PLEASE, EXCUSE HER!
FWSH
SHE NEGLECTED TO WATCH WHERE SHE WAS GOING.
SHE'S CLOSE TO MAOMAO, THAT'S RIGHT.
...AH HAH.

YOU THINK AN APOLOGY IS GOING TO FIX ANY-THING?!
BUT THIS EUNUCH WILL BE PUNISHED FOR NOT HAVING THE ICE READY.
IT FALLS ON HIS HEAD, SO HIS ANGER IS UNDERSTAND-ABLE.
DAMN ...!
NOW WHAT?!
XIAOLAN DID CAUSE THIS ICE TO FALL OVER.
SHE WAS TOO EXCITED ABOUT THE HAIRPIN SHE'D RECEIVED FROM A CONSORT, SHE WASN'T PAYING ANY ATTENTION.
ICE WITH EVEN A SINGLE SPECK OF DIRT ON IT ISN'T FIT TO BE SERVED.
BUT JUST LETTING ALL OF THIS MELT WOULD BE SUCH A WASTE.

IF A CONSORT SENT FOR A CUBE OF ICE THIS LARGE...
...WAS IT A PRINCIPAL CONSORT? OR A MID-RANKING CONSORT FROM A WEALTHY BACKGROUND?
WHICH CONSORT IS THIS FOR?
CONSORT LOULAN.
OF ALL THE CONSORTS IT COULD'VE BEEN...
I VERY MUCH DOUBT...
...MONEY WOULD BE ENOUGH TO SMOOTH THIS OVER WITH HOW SHOWY SHE IS.
SO WHAT DO WE DO?
SHE MUST HAVE WANTED TO WELCOME THE EVENING WITH A COOL DESSERT.
DISPLEASING A HIGH RANKING CONSORT IS A TERRIBLE THING INDEED.

...WE COULD PREPARE SOMETHING THAT COULD TAKE THE ICE'S PLACE...
IF ONLY...
AH
MAY I USE THIS ICE?
VERY WELL.
I WILL USE THIS ICE TO PREPARE AN ALTERNATIVE DESSERT FOR THE CONSORT.
WOULD YOU TAKE IT TO HER, ONCE IT IS READY?
WHATEVER, GO AHEAD.

THAT'S CUTTING IT CLOSE.
CAN I GET THE INGREDIENTS I NEED IN TIME?
STAAARE
NO, DON'T WORRY ABOUT THAT NOW.
IF YOU CAN, FEEL FREE.
BUT SHE'LL BE WANTING IT IN ONLY AN HOUR OR SO.
I SIMPLY HAVE TO MAKE DO WITH WHAT I CAN.
GLANCE
NO.
WHAT?! WHEN DID HE—
GRIIIN
にまー

THERE'S NO TIME TO DWELL ON THAT.
医務室
UGH...
HCK...
UGH...
THERE, THERE.
WAAAAH
WHAT DO I DOOO...
MAO... MA...
WHO KNOWS HOW SHE MAY HAVE BEEN PUNISHED ON THE SPOT.
SHE WAS TOO AFRAID TO EVEN MOVE.

...
...
MAY I BORROW THE KITCHEN, AND A HANDFUL OF INGREDIENTS?
HOW MAY I HELP?
STOMP ずん
STOMP ずん
I ABSOLUTELY DO NOT HAVE TIME FOR THIS SONG AND DANCE.
GRRRGH...
...IN EXCHANGE FOR SOME-THING?
YOU UNDERSTAND THAT FAVORS ARE USUALLY DONE...

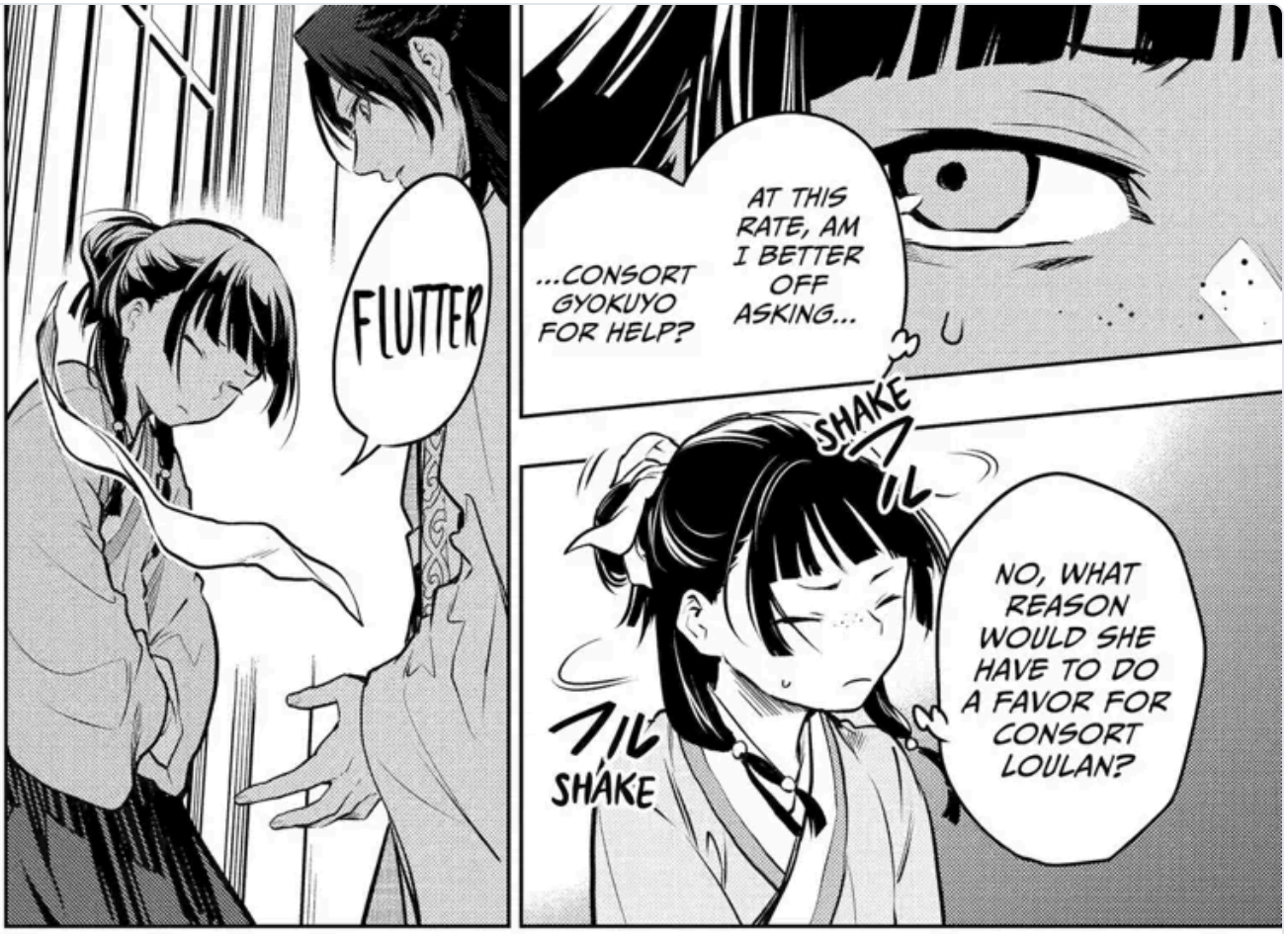
I'M NOT OBLIGATED TO TRY AND SAVE HER.

AND YET...

BUT I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO SLEEP PROPERLY IF I NEGLECT TO ACT.
YES. AND THAT WOULD HINDER MY CAPACITY TO WORK.
YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO SLEEP, YOU SAY?
PFF
KHH HEH...
WELL, WE CAN'T HAVE THAT.

THEN I'LL GIVE YOU A CONDITION TO SATISFY.
GULP...
IS THAT ALL YOU WANT FROM ME?
FROM NOW ON, WHEN SOMEONE IS TALKING TO YOU...
...LISTEN TO EVERYTHING THEY HAVE TO SAY.

"IS THAT ALL?" THAT'S A LOT FOR YOU.
FINE.
ANOTHER CONDITION, THEN.
THAT SO?
I'VE GOT A BAD FEELING ABOUT THIS.
SHUDDER
ANY SUGGEST-IONS?

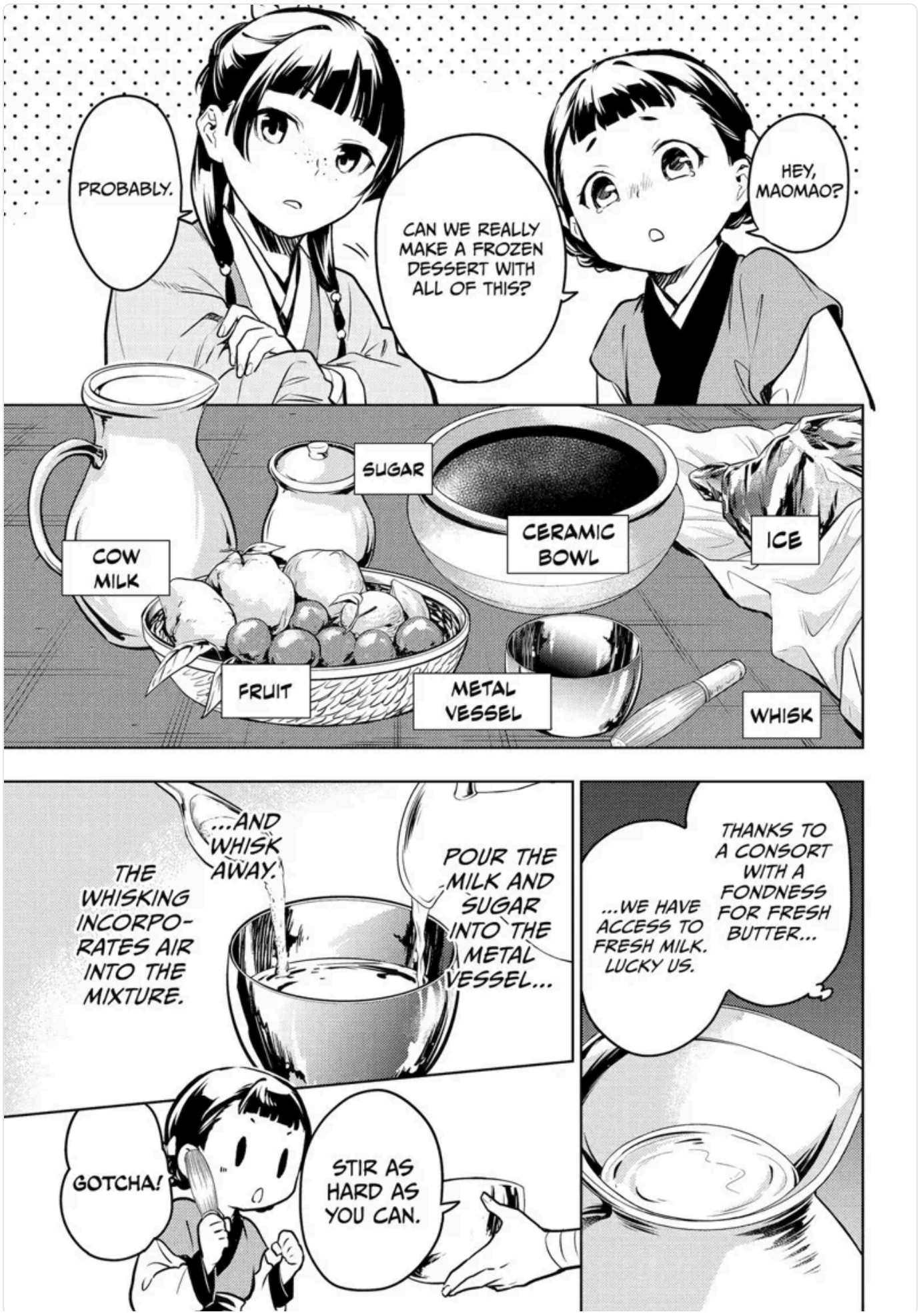

FLUTTER
...CONSORT GYOKUYO FOR HELP?
AT THIS RATE, AM I BETTER OFF ASKING...
SHAKE
SHAKE
NO, WHAT REASON WOULD SHE HAVE TO DO A FAVOR FOR CONSORT LOULAN?

YOUR PEERS IN THE JADE PALACE APPRECIATE ORNAMENT-ATION.
SO THEY SAY, BUT...
...I DO NOT.
THANK YOU
YOU...
...DON'T WEAR A HAIRPIN?

NOT YET.
OF COURSE NOT, SIR.
YOU DIDN'T HAWK IT, DID YOU?
I KNOW I GAVE YOU A HAIRPIN BEFORE THE GARDEN BANQUET.
THEN I WANT YOU TO WEAR IT.
FINE.
IS THAT ALL?
...

I'LL TELL YOU ONCE YOU'RE WEARING IT.
WHSPR
SHAKE
SHAKE
IS THAT TOO MUCH?

?
NOW, COME. WE HAVE PREPARATIONS TO MAKE.


HEY, MAOMAO?
CAN WE REALLY MAKE A FROZEN DESSERT WITH ALL OF THIS?
PROBABLY.
SUGAR
CERAMIC BOWL
ICE
COW MILK
FRUIT
METAL VESSEL
WHISK
THANKS TO A CONSORT WITH A FONDNESS FOR FRESH BUTTER...
...WE HAVE ACCESS TO FRESH MILK. LUCKY US.
POUR THE MILK AND SUGAR INTO THE METAL VESSEL...
...AND WHISK AWAY.
THE WHISKING INCORPO-RATES AIR INTO THE MIXTURE.
STIR AS HARD AS YOU CAN.
GOTCHA!

I'M CRUSHING THE ICE.
WHAT WAS THAT?
GAWP...
CRACK ガリ
SWSH しゃか
SWSH しゃか
XIAO-LAN.
PUT YOUR METAL BOWL IN HERE.
OKAY!
CLACK カラ
CLACK カラ
WITH IT CRUSHED WELL ENOUGH, YOU PUT IT IN THE BOWL...
KSSHH がしょ
KSSHH がしょ
...WITH A HEALTHY AMOUNT OF SALT AND SOME WATER.

I SUPPOSE FOR RECREATING SOMETHING I'D SEEN ONLY ONCE...
...THIS IS AS GOOD AS THIS ICE CREAM WILL GET.
WOOOW!
...WE COULD'VE INCLUDED AN EGG, OR HERBS FOR FRAGRANCE.
IF WE'D HAD MORE TIME...
...BUT DON'T WE NEED TO TASTE IT?
NOW THIS NEEDS TO BE DELIVERED.
WELL, OKAY...
NOM
MMM!
WE CAN HAVE WHAT'S LEFT OVER.
SHE'S BACK TO ACTING LIKE HERSELF.

IT'S REALLY DONE?
TAKE IT TO THE CON-SORT!
OKAY! ALL DONE!
IT'S SO GOOD!
NGH!!
WHY DON'T YOU TELL ME? WILL THIS WORK?

OKAY, OKAY.
HURRY! BEFORE IT MELTS!
RABBLE
RABBLE
DAZE
ぼわん
GULP
ごくん
TMP
TMP
TMP
WE STILL DON'T KNOW IF THE CONSORT WILL LIKE IT.
THANKS?
WHEW!
THANKS A LOT, MAOMAO!

SHEESH!
HM
COME ON, STOP MESSING WITH ME!
PEEK
YEAH, LET'S DIG IN!
WHATEVER. WE SHOULD EAT THIS BEFORE IT MELTS, IF WE'RE GOING TO.
FROM WHAT JINSHI TOLD ME ABOUT HER TASTES...
...IT SHOULD APPEAL TO HER.
AND I WAS SURE TO MAKE PLENTY.
SHISUI!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

HEY, SHISUI! DON'T HOG IT ALL TO YOUR-SELF!
MMH! DA'S GOOD!
ALREADY GOBBLED UP.
AREN'T THEY EAGER...
TEE HEE
TSK! SLACKER!
I CAUGHT WIND OF A HUBBUB.
I JUST HAD TO DITCH WORK TO CHECK IT OUT.
MAYBE WE CAN MAKE ONE MORE BATCH?